

Section 3: Planning Area Profile

This section provides a general overview of the Unifour Region which has been defined as the planning area for this Plan. It consists of the following four subsections:

- 3.1 Geography and the Environment
- 3.2 Population and Demographics
- 3.3 Housing, Infrastructure, and Land Use
- 3.4 Employment and Industry

3.1 Geography and the Environment

The Unifour Region is comprised of the four counties in the Catawba Valley region of western North Carolina: Alexander County, Burke County, Caldwell County, and Catawba County. The Unifour Region is the same as the “Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton Metropolitan Statistical Area” as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. A map profiling the planning area is shown in **Figure 3.1**.

Table 3.1 shows total land and water area for the four counties and for the Unifour Region as a whole.

Table 3.1: Total Land and Water Area for the Unifour Region

County	Total Land Area (In Square Miles)	Total Water Area (In Square Miles)	Total Area (In Square Miles)
Alexander	260	3	263
Burke	507	8	515
Caldwell	472	3	474
Catawba	400	14	414
TOTAL UNIFOUR	1,639	28	1,666

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

Alexander County's main geographic feature is the Brushy Mountains, a deeply eroded spur of the Blue Ridge Mountains to the west. They rise from 300 to 1,000 feet above the surrounding countryside, and dominate the county's northern horizon. The highest point in Alexander County is Hickory Knob with an elevation of 2,560 feet above sea level. Barrett Mountain, an isolated mountain ridge, is located in the western portion of the county. The remainder of Alexander County's terrain consists of gently rolling countryside.

The varied landscape of Burke County ranges from the Blue Ridge escarpment to the rolling plains of the western piedmont. Table Rock, a prominent peak in Burke County in the east rim of Linville Gorge, is part of the Pisgah National Forest and has been described as “the most visible symbol in the region.” The county has abundant natural resources including South Mountains State Park, Pisgah National Forest and the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area, the Catawba River, the Johns River, the Henry River, Table Rock Mountain, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the 3,000-acre expansion of the Lake James State Park. These natural resources offer excellent recreational opportunities and attract visitors from across the southeastern United States.

Figure 3.1: Planning Area Profile Map



Caldwell County is divided into three distinct geographic sections: the Blue Ridge Mountains, which dominate the northern and western parts of the county; the gently rolling Piedmont country in the middle and southern parts of the county; and the Brushy Mountains, an isolated remnant of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The Brushy Mountains run across much of Caldwell County's eastern section. Hibriten Mountain, located within the city limits of Lenoir, the county's largest city, marks the western end of the Brushy Mountain range. In the western part of the county is the Wilson Creek area.

Catawba County is located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It is located in the region referred to as the Upper Piedmont Plateau, more commonly known as the "foothills." The elevation of the county averages 995 feet with a range from a high of 1,780 feet at Bakers Mountain in the west-central portion of the county to a low of 705 feet where the Catawba River leaves the county. The county's landscape can be described as "rolling" with fairly broad ridges and some short steep slopes. Geologically, Catawba County lies within the Inner Piedmont Belt comprised mostly of metamorphic and intrusive rocks. About 45.5% of the county's acreage is wooded, of which 98% is privately owned.

The Catawba River, which is influential to all four counties in the planning area, begins in the Blue Ridge Mountains and flows 225 miles into Lake Wateree in South Carolina. The river is an extraordinary eco-system that provides habitat for 50 fish species, 160 bird species, and 120 tree species. The river also serves as a source of electric power, provides recreational opportunities for residents and tourists, and is one of the major economic foundations of the region. It transects Burke County, creates the southern borders of Caldwell and Alexander counties, and the northern and eastern borders of Catawba County.

3.2 Population and Demographics

Catawba County has the largest population of the four participating counties and the City of Hickory is the largest city located within the planning area. Several participating jurisdictions experienced a decrease in population between 2000 and 2010. The Town of Catawba experienced the largest percentage decrease of -15.75% (from a 2000 population of 698 to a 2010 population of 603). The Town of Rhodhiss experienced the largest percentage increase with an increase of 65.79% (from a 2000 population of 366 to a 2010 population of 1,070). Population counts from the U.S. Census Bureau for 1990, 2000, and 2010 for each of the participating counties and jurisdictions are presented in **Table 3.2**.

Table 3.2: Population Counts for Participating Jurisdictions

Jurisdiction	1990 Census Population	2000 Census Population	2010 Census Population	% Change 2000-2010
Alexander County (Unincorporated Area)	25,457	31,804	35,100	9.39%
Taylorsville	2,087	1,799	2,098	14.25%
<i>Subtotal Alexander</i>	<i>27,544</i>	<i>33,603</i>	<i>37,198</i>	<i>9.66%</i>
Burke County (Unincorporated Area)	49,109	59,746	59,578	-0.28%
Connelly Springs	1,389	1,814	1,669	-8.69%
Drexel	1,760	1,938	1,858	-4.31%
Glen Alpine	1,060	1,090	1,517	28.15%
Hildebran	1,363	1,472	2,023	27.24%
Morganton	15,875	17,310	16,918	-2.32%

Jurisdiction	1990 Census Population	2000 Census Population	2010 Census Population	% Change 2000-2010
Valdese	4,002	4,485	4,490	0.11%
Rutherford College	1,186	1,293	1,341	3.58%
<i>Subtotal Burke</i>	<i>75,744</i>	<i>89,148</i>	<i>90,912</i>	<i>1.94%</i>
Caldwell County (Unincorporated Area)	36,172	41,003	43,501	5.74%
Cajah's Mountain	2,540	2,683	2,823	4.96%
Cedar Rock	280	315	300	-5.00%
Gamewell	3,431	3,644	4,051	10.05%
Granite Falls	3,904	4,612	4,722	2.33%
Hudson	3,094	3,078	3,776	18.49%
Lenoir	16,278	16,793	18,228	7.87%
Rhodhiss	321	366	1,070	65.79%
Sawmills	4,689	4,921	5,240	6.09%
<i>Subtotal Caldwell</i>	<i>70,709</i>	<i>77,415</i>	<i>83,029</i>	<i>6.76%</i>
Catawba County (Unincorporated Area)	62,571	75,145	83,533	10.04%
Brookford	431	434	382	-13.61%
Catawba	580	698	603	-15.75%
Claremont	1,037	1,060	1,352	21.60%
Conover	5,564	6,667	8,165	18.35%
Hickory	29,474	37,222	40,010	6.97%
Long View	4,365	4,722	4,871	3.06%
Maiden	3,191	3,177	3,310	4.02%
Newton	11,199	12,560	12,968	3.15%
<i>Subtotal Catawba</i>	<i>118,412</i>	<i>141,685</i>	<i>154,358</i>	<i>8.21%</i>
TOTAL UNIFOUR	292,409	341,851	365,497	6.47%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Based on the 2010 Census, the median age for residents of the participating counties ranges from 39 to 41 years. The racial characteristics of the participating counties are presented in **Table 3.3**. Generally, whites make up the vast majority of the population of the Region, accounting for almost 89% percent of the Region's population.

Table 3.3: Demographics of Participating Counties

County	White Persons	Black Persons	Other Race	Persons of Hispanic Origin*
Alexander	91.6%	5.7%	2.7%	4.3%
Burke	86.7%	6.8%	6.5%	5.7%
Caldwell	92.2%	5.1%	2.7%	4.8%
Catawba	85.3%	8.7%	6.0%	8.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

*Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.

3.3 Housing, Infrastructure, and Land Use

3.3.1 Housing

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 163,144 housing units in the Unifour Region, most of which are single family homes (according to the 2010 census). Housing information for the four participating counties is presented in **Table 3.4**. As shown in the table, Catawba County has the highest number of housing units compared to the other counties. Alexander County has the least. In terms of median home value, Catawba County has the highest and Caldwell County has the lowest.

Table 3.4: Housing Characteristics

County	Housing Units (2011)	Median Home Value (2007-2011)
Alexander	16,341	\$121,400
Burke	41,040	\$110,500
Caldwell	37,841	\$106,800
Catawba	67,922	\$129,000
TOTAL/AVERAGE UNIFOUR	163,144	\$116,925

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

3.3.2 Infrastructure

Major roads in the planning area include I-40, US 64, US 70, US 221, US 321, NC 10, NC 16, NC 18, NC 90, NC 114, NC 126, NC 127, NC 150, NC 181, and NC 268. Hickory Regional Airport is the primary commercial aviation airport in the region. It was served by commercial airlines until 2005.

National protected areas in the planning area include Blue Ridge Parkway and Pisgah National Forest.

Colleges and universities in the planning area include Appalachian Center at Hickory, Appalachian Center at Lenoir, Appalachian Center at Morganton, Catawba Valley Community College Alexander Campus, Catawba Valley Community College in Hickory, Gardner-Webb University Hickory Center, Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, N.C. Center for Engineering Technologies, and Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton.

3.3.3 Land Use

Current land use in Alexander County can be characterized as being mainly “residential” or “vacant.” Given the county’s rural and agricultural history, these land use patterns are not surprising. Unlike other counties in the Unifour Region, Alexander County is the only county with a single municipality. Taylorsville, the County seat, is the center of its local government services and its low population also reflects the county’s rural heritage. The vast majority of land in Alexander County is devoted to residential uses. Of the nearly 160,800 acres in the county, 96% is occupied by residential uses or is vacant and could be used for residential purposes. To state the opposite, only slightly more than 1,000 of the county’s 24,300 land parcels are designated for uses other than residential, mostly industrial or commercial. In terms of future land use in Alexander County, future

policy makers should continue to think about the amount of land currently zoned residential, especially in the RA-20 Zoning District and used primarily for agriculture. These parcels represent land that could potentially be subdivided into residential uses in the coming decades. While market forces basically drive these decisions, existing data provides some indication of development pressures across the Unifour Region.

Growth and development in Burke County is predominantly located around the incorporated areas along the I-40 corridor. There is also a growing trend of second home development in the area around Lake James and the Jonas Ridge Community in the northwest portion of the county. Small area plans have been completed for the I-40 corridor and for the watershed around Lake James. In some cases, growth and development result in the alteration of natural topographic features that, in turn, affect the extent of flooding and the boundary of the floodplain.

In terms of undeveloped land in Caldwell County that could potentially be developed for allowable uses, there are approximately 149,140 undeveloped acres currently zoned as residential, 1,060 undeveloped acres zoned commercial, 1,255 undeveloped acres zoned industrial, and 51,400 undeveloped acres zoned for other land use types. This is a total of 202,855 undeveloped acres that could be developed and that could potentially be located in various hazard areas.

While Catawba County is becoming more developed and more urban in nature, it still consists of a large amount of rural and farm lands. As described in Catawba County's Farm & Food Sustainability Plan (2013), Catawba County has a cropland acreage of approximately 36,600 acres with 14,100 acres of woodland. The total "farmland" of 71,906 acres represents approximately 28 percent of the county's land area. These non-urban uses represent approximately 210 square miles; roughly half of the county. Furthermore, nearly half of the county's population is now located within incorporated areas. These numbers all seem to paint a picture of a changing county; one with a generous amount of rural, undisturbed land and at the same time one with a number of emerging centers of human activity. Catawba County has seven small area plans that were completed from 2000 to 2005 which serve as County long-range plans. All have a goal of rural preservation which came from citizen input during a series of community meetings.

3.4 Employment and Industry

The Hickory area in Catawba County is home to many leading manufacturers of furniture, fiber optic cable, and pressure-sensitive tape. It is estimated that 60% of the nation's furniture used to be produced within a 200-mile radius of the City of Hickory. Forty percent of the world's fiber optic cable is made in the Hickory area. The Hickory area is additionally known as a datacenter corridor and is home to large datacenters operated by Apple and Google. Hickory is the retail hub of the foothills and Unifour Region, and is home to the largest shopping mall in the region, Valley Hills Mall.